PROJECT:
PATIE
NULL404.EXE

PROJECT: PLAYTIME

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NULL404.EXE

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Collaborations referenced:
The Hotel — MSI_develops
The Backrooms — Ayman DK
Garten of Banban — nightmaregamer6342

Chapter One

Job Opportunity

Nathan Bobson had read the email three times before it truly registered as real.

The first time, he assumed it was spam.
The second time, he thought it was a joke.
By the third time, his heartbeat had slowed into something far more dangerous—curiosity.

He leaned back in the creaking office chair of his small apartment, staring at the cold glow of his laptop screen. Outside his window, the city dragged itself through another sleepless night. Distant traffic murmured like restless insects. Somewhere far below, a siren wailed and then faded. Life continued as usual.

Inside his apartment, however, the air felt unnaturally still.

Playtime Co.

Even thinking the name made something tighten in his chest.

The factory had been shut down twenty-three years ago. Officially, it had been labeled a catastrophic industrial accident. Unofficially, it was a graveyard with paperwork.

Nearly every employee inside the building that day had either disappeared or been declared dead. The news had dominated headlines for weeks—mass casualty event, corporate negligence, structural failure, chemical contamination. The explanations kept changing. Then, suddenly, the coverage stopped.

Records were sealed.
Lawsuits dissolved.
Witness accounts contradicted each other.

The government called it a tragedy and moved on.

But Nathan had always believed something else happened there.

And now the same company—long presumed dead—was offering him a job.

He scrolled back up to the email and read it again slowly.

Leith Pierre. CEO of Playtime Co.

Temporary position. Retrieval Specialist.

Risk involved.

Forty thousand dollars upon completion.

No life insurance.

Nathan exhaled through his nose.

That last line was the only honest sentence in the entire message.

He stood and began pacing his apartment. The wooden floor creaked under his weight. Forty thousand dollars wasn't just money. It was oxygen. It was redemption. It was leverage against a world that had quietly decided he was disposable.

He stopped in front of the dark window and studied his reflection.

Tall. Lean. Strong shoulders from years of manual labor jobs. Brown curls that refused to stay neat. Eyes that looked older than they should.

He had survived prison. He had survived isolation. He had survived the kind of guilt that didn't fade with time.

Most importantly, he had survived panic.

While others froze, Nathan moved.

That instinct had saved him more than once.

It had not saved his brother.

The memory surfaced without permission.

Sixteen years old. A backyard. Friends laughing. A gun passed around like a toy. Nathan bragging about his aim.

A careless trigger pull.

The sound had been louder than expected.

His brother's laughter had cut off mid-breath.

For a split second, nobody reacted. Then the screaming began.

Blood soaking into grass.

His brother collapsing, confusion still frozen on his face.

Nathan shut his eyes hard.

The court dates.
The headlines.
The prison cell.

The word "accident" never felt sufficient.

His criminal record had followed him like a shadow ever since. Every job application. Every background check. Every opportunity quietly rescinded.

Forty thousand dollars.

A reset.

He walked back to the laptop.

"I'm taking it," he said quietly to the empty room.

He shut the screen.

That night, sleep came faster than it had in months.

And then the nightmare began.

He woke to silence.

But not normal silence.

Heavy silence.

The kind that presses against your ears.

His room was dark—but not the familiar dark of night. This darkness felt thick. Suffocating.

He sat up slowly.

The walls were gone.

Not damaged. Not cracked.

Gone.

His bedroom had been torn apart. The drywall hung in jagged chunks. Furniture lay splintered across the floor. The air smelled metallic.

Blood.

There was a body near the doorway.

Nathan's brain refused to identify it.

It was the brother he had shot.

His breathing became shallow.

"It can't be," he whispered.

Then he sensed it.

Something else was in the room.

"Who's here??"

He turned his head slowly toward the far corner.

It stood there.

Tall—roughly human height—but wrong in every other way. Its torso was shaped like a box. Its limbs extended on thick coiled springs instead of bones. Its head, hands, and feet were covered in matted red fur. The springs flexed slightly, humming with tension.

It did not breathe.

It did not blink.

It only watched him.

Nathan tried to move, but fear pinned him to the mattress.

The creature tilted its head slightly.

Waiting.

His instincts finally broke through the paralysis.

He lunged off the bed and sprinted toward a jagged opening in what used to be his wall.

Behind him—

Nothing.

Silence.

For half a second, hope flickered.

Then the springs compressed.

The sound was violent metal tension snapping into release.

The creature launched forward.

Faster than logic allowed. Faster than muscle should move. It crossed the ruined bedroom in less than a heartbeat.

Nathan didn't even feel the impact.

One moment he was running.

The next he was airborne.

The jaws closed around his torso.

The pressure was indescribable.

Bones shattered.

The world dissolved into black.

Nathan bolted upright in his real bed, gasping.

His room was intact.

Walls standing. Furniture undisturbed. No blood. No creature.

Morning light filtered softly through the curtains.

His shirt was soaked in sweat.

His heart pounded so violently he thought it might tear through his ribs.

"It was just a dream," he whispered.

But the sensation of crushing pressure lingered.

He checked the clock.

8:15 a.m.

He was late.

The day moved in a blur. Shower. Clothes. Quick glance in the mirror. He avoided looking at his eyes for too long.

The Playtime Toys shop was worse than he expected.

It looked abandoned—like something left behind after a natural disaster.

The windows were yellowed and cracked. The sign hung crookedly. Dust clung to every surface. The shelves inside looked half-rotted.

Yet the lights were on.

Nathan stepped inside.

The air smelled stale.

Behind the counter stood a young woman with perfectly styled hair and an unsettlingly bright smile.

“Welcome!” she said cheerfully.

Nathan hesitated. “I’m… a specialist.”

The transformation was immediate.

Her smile vanished.

Her posture straightened.

Her eyes lost warmth.

She pressed something beneath the counter.

“Sir. It’s a specialist,” she whispered.

A deep voice crackled through hidden speakers.

“Buzz him in, Maria.”

A section of the wall behind her slid open with a mechanical groan.

Nathan stared at it.

There hadn’t been a door there seconds ago.

“Step inside,” she said softly.

There was no cheer left in her voice.

Nathan stepped through the opening.

The wall closed behind him with a final, echoing thud.

And for the first time that day, he felt certain of one thing:

He had just stepped somewhere he might not walk back out of.

Chapter Two

The Meeting

The corridor beyond the sliding wall did not match the decaying toyshop Nathan had just stepped through.

The air changed first.

It no longer smelled of dust and neglect. Instead, it carried a faint sterile scent—metallic, clean, controlled. The lighting shifted from flickering fluorescent to low, recessed panels embedded seamlessly into the ceiling. The floor beneath his boots was polished concrete, smooth and uncracked.

The wall behind him sealed shut with a mechanical click that sounded far too permanent.

Nathan turned slowly.

There were no visible handles. No seams. No keypad.

Just a wall.

“Right,” he muttered under his breath.

A narrow hallway stretched ahead. At the far end stood a heavy steel door with frosted glass at eye level. Behind the glass, faint silhouettes moved.

Nathan adjusted his jacket and walked forward.

Each step echoed slightly.

When he reached the door, it opened automatically.

The room beyond was immaculate.

A long rectangular table dominated the center. Its dark surface reflected the soft overhead lighting. Six leather chairs surrounded it—five occupied.

At the head of the table stood a pale man in a faded charcoal suit.

He looked older than Nathan expected. Wrinkles carved into thin skin. Hair combed carefully back, though it was beginning to thin. His posture was straight, almost rigid. His hands were clasped behind his back.

His eyes were sharp.

Too sharp.

“I presume you are Mr. Bobson,” the man said smoothly.

His voice was deep but controlled, like someone accustomed to speaking in boardrooms.

“Yes, sir,” Nathan replied.

The man inclined his head slightly.

“I am Leith Pierre, CEO of Playtime Co.”

The name sounded heavier in person.

Nathan took one of the empty seats.

The other men watched him with varying levels of interest.

To his left sat a blonde man with striking features and immaculate posture. He held a small handheld mirror and was studying his reflection as if the situation bored him.

Across from Nathan sat a British-sounding man—no older than 20—thin, sharp-eyed, visibly irritated. His fingers drummed against the table.

Next to him sat a broad-shouldered Middle Eastern man in his early twenties. He looked tense, jaw clenched, eyes dark with something that wasn’t just anxiety.

Two other men sat farther down the table. One older, quiet, observant. The other fidgets, scanning the room as if expecting something to jump from the walls.

Leith began pacing slowly around the table.

“Gentlemen,” he said calmly, “you have been selected through a very specific screening process. Physical capability. Psychological resilience. Adaptability under stress. You represent a refined group.”

The British man scoffed lightly. “You mean desperate.”

Leith ignored the comment.

“Tomorrow morning at precisely 6:15 a.m., you will board a train at the old Playtime Co. station. The train will transport you to the factory.”

The word factory seemed to darken the room.

“You will retrieve certain company assets.”

“What assets?” Nathan asked evenly.

Leith stopped pacing and looked directly at him.

“Property that belongs to us.”

“That’s not an answer,” the British man snapped. “You’re sending us into a place that was sealed after a massacre. We deserve details.”

Leith’s expression did not change.

“Patience, mister,” he replied smoothly. “Everything will come into the light when you arrive.”

“‘Come into the light’?” the man repeated sarcastically. “What is this, a cult?”

The Middle Eastern man leaned forward abruptly. “You’re seriously sending us back?” he demanded, voice tight with restrained anger. “After what you did?”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop.

Leith’s eyes shifted slowly toward him.

“Careful,” he said quietly.

“What is this about?” Nathan asked, glancing between them. “Back?”

The Middle Eastern man looked at Nathan briefly, then away. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Then explain it,” Nathan pressed.

“BE QUIET!” Leith’s voice thundered through the room.

The sudden outburst made everyone flinch.

Silence fell instantly.

Leith adjusted his cuffs calmly, as if the moment had not occurred.

“This,” he said in a controlled tone, “is a very good opportunity. We have selected only the best candidates. You are here because you have survived circumstances that most people would not.”

His gaze swept across them one by one.

“Each of you has demonstrated experience with… abnormal environments.”

Nathan’s stomach tightened.

So they knew.

They had researched everything.

“Let’s stop pretending,” the British man muttered. “The factory isn’t empty.”

Leith smiled faintly.

“No,” he said. “It is not.”

The room held its breath.

The older man at the far end finally spoke. “Are the… things… still active?”

Leith did not answer directly.

“You will be provided with equipment,” he continued. “You will receive detailed instructions upon arrival. Complete the assignment, and you will be compensated in full.”

“And if we don’t?” Nathan asked.

Leith stopped pacing again.

“If you survive, you will receive full payment.”

The word survive hung in the air like smoke.

The British man leaned back in his chair. “If? What does ‘if’ mean, Leith? What is in the factory? You never told us!”

“Patience,” Leith repeated.

“You’re sending us into that place after what YOU did?” the Middle Eastern man repeated, louder this time.

“Calm down,” Nathan said quietly. “What happened there?”

“You won’t understand,” the man replied.

“BE QUIET,” Leith barked again, though this time it was colder than loud.

The room obeyed instantly.

Leith walked slowly to the head of the table.

“And if any of you consider contacting law enforcement,” he added calmly, forming a finger gun with unsettling casualness, “you will be handled.”

The gesture was almost playful.

The meaning was not. No one spoke. The air felt heavy, oppressive.

Finally, Leith clasped his hands behind his back once more.

“You are dismissed. Initial payments have already been transferred. Enjoy your evening.”

Chairs scraped against the floor as the men stood. Nathan checked his Iphone instinctively. $400 deposited. Real. No illusion.

The British man muttered something under his breath as he left the room.

The Middle Eastern man walked out without looking back.

The blonde man closed his mirror with a soft click and stood gracefully. “Well,” he said lightly, “this should be entertaining.”

Nathan watched him go.

Entertaining. That wasn’t the word Nathan would have chosen.

As he stepped back into the hallway, the steel door sealed behind him. The hidden wall reopened into the toyshop. Maria stood behind the counter again. Her smile had returned.

“Have a wonderful evening,” she said sweetly. Nathan studied her face for any hint of humanity beneath the corporate mask. There was none. He stepped outside. The afternoon air felt too bright. Too normal.

People walked past him, laughing, talking, scrolling through their phones. No one knew what waited beneath the city in an abandoned factory.

No one knew what he had just agreed to.

His phone buzzed again. The payment confirmation notification glowed on the screen. It was real.

He walked home in silence. That night, he sat in his apartment longer than usual, staring at the ceiling. He tried to rationalize everything. It was just a retrieval job. A controlled environment. Equipment provided. He had survived worse.

But something in Leith’s eyes replayed in his mind. Not excitement. Not greed. Expectation. Like a man placing bets.

Nathan eventually lay down. For the first time in years—He did not dream.

Chapter Three

The Mission

Nathan reached the old station at 6:12 a.m., lungs burning and sweat clinging to his collar.

The sky above the city was a dull gray, not quite sunrise, not quite night. The station itself had been abandoned for years. The sign that once read “Playtime Co. Transit” hung crookedly above the entrance, rust bleeding down its metal supports. Windows were boarded. Vines crawled up the brick exterior like nature had been trying to reclaim the structure for decades.

Yet the lights were on.

A thin column of steam rose from somewhere beyond the platform.

Nathan slowed as he stepped inside.

The interior looked frozen in time. Dusty ticket counters. Torn posters advertising smiling cartoon mascots. A faded banner that read:

WELCOME TO PLAYTIME!

The letters were peeling.

On the platform stood the train.

It looked ridiculous.

Bright primary colors painted across its body like giant toy blocks snapped together. Red. Yellow. Blue. The front had two oversized cartoonish eyes mounted on thick metal springs that gently bounced with every hiss of steam.

It looked like something built for children. But the steel beneath the paint was industrial-grade. Heavy. Reinforced. Real.

The other specialists were already there.

Each of them wore a mechanical backpack fitted with two extended artificial arms ending in oversized hands—blue and red.

The British man paced near the edge of the platform, muttering to himself.

The Middle Eastern man stood rigid, staring at the train with a look that bordered on hatred.

The blonde man leaned casually against a pillar, checking his reflection in his mirror again.

The older man adjusted the straps on his equipment methodically.

Nathan approached cautiously.

The young man who had spoken to him yesterday stepped forward.

“It’s called a GrabPack,” he said, holding one up. “Dual-handed extension tool. High tensile cable, motorized retraction. You’ll need it.”

Nathan took the pack. It was heavier than it looked.

He slid his arms through the straps and adjusted it across his shoulders. The metal frame rested firmly against his back. The gloves felt oddly natural once fitted.

He flexed his fingers.

The mechanical hands mimicked the movement.

“Try it,” the young man said.

Nathan aimed at a metal railing and pressed the trigger.

The blue hand shot forward with a sharp mechanical whirr and latched onto the rail. A split second later, it retracted smoothly, pulling him slightly off balance.

The response was clean.

Precise.

“Not bad,” Nathan muttered.

The young man nodded. “You’ll need reflexes.”

“What’s your name?” Nathan asked.

“Andrew. Andrew Almenaro.”

“Nathan.”

The train doors slid open with a hydraulic hiss.

Without ceremony, they boarded.

The interior of the train was quieter than expected.

There were no colorful decorations inside. No toy-like design. Just steel walls, reinforced benches, dim overhead lights.

The doors sealed shut behind them.

The train lurched forward.

For a while, no one spoke.

The rhythmic clanking of tracks echoed beneath them.

Then Andrew broke the silence casually.

“So… have you ever dealt with anything supernatural before?”

Nathan glanced at him. “Why?”

Andrew shrugged. “Just asking.”

“Why?”

Andrew leaned back against the metal wall. “Because I survived a hotel that got closed down when I was sixteen.”

The British man looked over immediately. “The hotel?”

Andrew nodded. “Rush. Seek. Screech. Ambush. Figure. Sally. Jack. Guiding Light. Curious Light.”

The names sounded absurd.

But something in Andrew’s tone wasn’t joking.

Nathan felt something shift in his memory.

Six years ago.

An old abandoned hotel.

Chains being broken off a door.

A boy forcing his way inside.

Andrew.

“That was you,” Nathan said quietly.

Andrew looked at him. “What?”

“I saw you. Years ago. Breaking into that place.”

Andrew stared for a moment.

“Small world,” he muttered.

The Middle Eastern man let out a quiet, humorless laugh. “Not small. Calculated.”

“What do you mean?” Nathan asked.

“They picked us,” the man replied. “Every one of us has survived something.”

The older man nodded slowly. “They’ve been watching.”

The train screeched violently as it began slowing.

Through the small reinforced windows, Nathan saw it.

The factory.

Massive.

Dark.

Silent.

The silhouette of Playtime Co.'s main facility loomed ahead like a corpse of industry. Tall smokestacks. Broken windows. Rusted metal framework stretching across multiple buildings.

The train ground to a halt.

The doors opened.

Cold air spilled in.

They stepped out.

The factory floor was enormous.

Checkered tiles in red, blue, and white stretched across the space. Many were cracked. Some were stained.

Dark red stains.

Not recent.

But not clean either.

The train doors sealed shut behind them.

It did not wait.

It departed.

Nathan watched it vanish down the track.

They were alone.

A crackling sound filled the air.

Speakers hidden somewhere high above activated.

Leith's voice echoed through the cavernous space.

"Solve all puzzle pillars. Collect seven toy parts. Deposit them in the central unit. Assemble the toy. Pull the plunger. Survive."

The word survive echoed longer than the others.

Then the speakers cut.

Silence returned.

A low, distant roar rolled through the building.

It vibrated in Nathan's chest.

Something had awakened.

"Spread out," Andrew said quietly.

They moved.

Nathan kept to the outer corridors.

The factory felt wrong.

It wasn't just abandoned—it felt inhabited.

Heavy metal walkways crisscrossed overhead. Conveyor belts hung motionless. Giant machines stood frozen mid-operation like skeletal remains.

His footsteps echoed.

Then—

A heavy metallic stomp.

Above him.

Nathan froze and looked up.

On the catwalk overhead, something moved.

Large red furry feet paced slowly.

Each foot was square-shaped.

Three metal talons extended from each toe.

The springs connecting its limbs flexed with every step.

It stopped.

Then—

It dropped.

The impact shook the floor.

The creature straightened slowly.

Box-shaped torso.

Spring-loaded limbs.

Furry red head with wide, unnatural eyes.

Boxy Boo.

The nightmare creature from his dream.

Nathan dove behind a stack of wooden crates.

The creature's head turned slowly, scanning.

It made a low clicking noise, like metal tightening.

Nathan controlled his breathing.

Boxy took several steps forward.

Each movement produced a metallic recoil sound from the compressed springs.

After several seconds, it turned and began walking in the opposite direction.

Nathan waited.

Five seconds.

Ten.

Then he slowly backed away.

His heel scraped lightly against a loose tile.

The sound was small.

But in the silence—

It was enough.

Boxy's head snapped toward him instantly.

The springs compressed violently.

Nathan ran.

Boxy launched forward.

The speed was inhuman.

Nathan sprinted through twisting corridors, heart pounding violently. The factory blurred around him—machines, pipes, broken assembly lines.

He spotted a narrow opening ahead marked with yellow and black hazard stripes.

He fired the GrabPack.

The blue hand shot forward and latched.

He yanked himself through the opening just as a metal grate slammed down behind him with explosive force.

The impact nearly clipped his boots.

Boxy collided with the grate seconds later.

The metal groaned under pressure.

Nathan didn't wait.

He kept running.

Across the factory, Andrew stood atop a partially collapsed platform, focused on a towering puzzle pillar.

Lights flashed in complex patterns.

Buttons lit up in sequence.

Mechanical arms rotated overhead.

Andrew's reflexes were sharp.

He memorized the sequence instantly and executed it without hesitation.

The pillar unlocked with a mechanical hiss.

A toy part dropped into his hands.

"That's four," he muttered.

He had already deposited three earlier in the central machine.

He jumped from the platform.

Midair, he fired his GrabPack at a purple hand pad mounted high on a wall.

The recoil launched him upward with controlled force.

He flipped midair.

Landed smoothly.

Then he felt it.

He looked up.

Boxy Boo stood ten meters away.

Watching.

Its head tilted slowly.

The springs along its limbs trembled faintly.

“Bro is angrier than before,” Andrew muttered under his breath.

Boxy lunged.

Andrew sprinted.

He juked left sharply.

Boxy overcorrected and slammed into a metal support beam with explosive force.

Andrew couldn’t help himself.

Adrenaline mixed with confidence.

“But nah, I’m better,” he said under his breath.

He paused for half a second.

Long enough to mock.

He threw a quick taunting gesture.

Even did a short exaggerated dance step.

A brief, stupid “take-the-L” motion.

Boxy froze.

Its head lowered.

The springs compressed tighter than before.

Metal groaned.

Andrew’s grin faded slightly.

“Bro does not like Fortnite,” he muttered.

Boxy launched forward—not at Andrew—

But straight into a vertical pipe beside him, using it as leverage to ricochet off the wall at a new angle.

Faster.

More aggressive.

And Boxy Boo did not appreciate being mocked